



Concept and Scope of Action Anthropology

Introduction:

Action anthropology is a 20th century achievement. It has been coined by Sol Tax. According to him an action anthropologist is to study the process of change in the society and help the people to tide over the adverse effects of change and guide planning in such a way that the people do better in the processes of change.

In United States the earliest anthropologists who were considered as “government anthropologists” concerned themselves with the economic and political studies. They also covered the fields of religion, art, systems of value and personality structure as well as native patterns of education and other modes of social control. Personalities like R.S. Rattray, C.E. Mitchell could be included in the list of governmental anthropologists. Later on Professor Franz Boas, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Redfield, Sol Tax, S.F. Nadel, G.M. Foster, C.M. Conrad, A.H. Niehoff, M.J. Herskovits, Evans-Pritchard, Fred Eggan, A.L. Kroeber, C. Kluckhohn, R. Linton, D.G. Mandelbaum. E. Sapir, L. White, Edward Jay are amongst the front line anthropologists who devote their attention to the applied as well as action field. Some of them tried to pursue the line of thinking of Max Weber in assessing the role of action anthropologists in differentiating “the factual consequences of alternative modes of action” or in recommending” the best technical means for bringing about an end previously value-determined.” Even they had to move outside the realm of science.

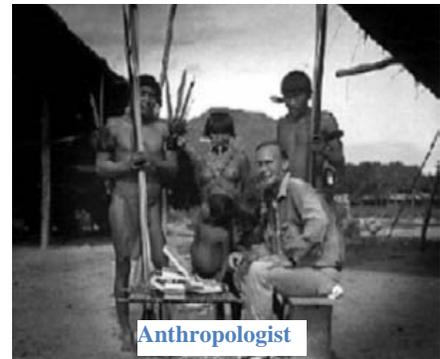
The Concept of Action Anthropology

Sol Tax proposed the term ‘action anthropology’ in 1958. It is an offshoot development from applied anthropology and it does not stop with the humanistic study. The action anthropologists involve themselves intimately with anthropological problems. It pursues their studies in a context of action. In such a study, the distinction between the pure research and the applied research generally disappears. The anthropologists accept a problem as their own and proceed through trial and error method. In fact, in the first exposure they may not be successful but they never feel disappointed or frustrated. Also an action anthropologist is not in the habit of blaming others. Rather he rectifies his own strategy and procedures. He carries on the same task with fresh vigour. He does not forget to follow up the whole procedure from time to time. The method of action anthropology, thus,

depends on “a clinical or experimental method of study”. While the special interest of the applied anthropologist rests on the humanistic studies in the natives and minority people, the action anthropologist urges upon the value of disinterested consideration of social phenomena, just as “a biologist might view protozoa on his microscope slide”. These two aspects of anthropology in action can be viewed as springing from two roots of the same plant. The major characteristic of action anthropology, as described by Sol Tax, is that while one is studying the anthropological problems, he pursues it in a context of action. He would not keep himself as a mere observer, but he involves in solving the problem. Sol Tax also mentions that the action anthropologist eschews ‘pure science’. Further he says “For one thing his work requires that he will not use people for an end not related to their own welfare, people are not related rats, and ought not to be treated like them. Not only should we not hurt people; we should not use them to the degree that the results are imminently useful to the community and easily outweigh the disturbance to it”.

Action Anthropology and Applied Anthropology:

Professor Edward Jay admits that he himself is not completely familiar with the differences between ‘action anthropology’ and ‘applied anthropology’ which are generally thought to be “two parallel but somewhat different schools of thought” in modern anthropology. According to Professor Jay, “from the ‘applied’ point of view, the anthropologist becomes so completely ‘expert’ on the culture he is studying as to be able to make the proper recommendations for administration on the basis of his knowledge. Of course to some extent this must always be true but action anthropology, adds another dimension to this point of view”.



Normally, the anthropologist can never know everything about a society other than his own, no matter how closely he is associated with it. Hence any recommendation, no matter how expert, is liable to a certain degree of errors. Social science has not yet progressed to a point where the complete and accurate prediction of human behavior is possible. Thus the anthropologist may advise his experience and knowledge. The best anthropologist can do, from the point of view of action anthropology, is to understand the needs and desires of the people which they themselves express. The first requisite of the anthropologist cum advisor is to listen to the wishes of the people he is studying. These plus his intimate observations of aboriginal life can then be utilized in the formulation of concrete recommendations of the government.

Professor Peattie interprets the distinction between applied anthropology and action anthropology based on the concerned approaches in a different way: “Applied Anthropology tries to move back and forth between value-interest and disinterested consideration of relevant fact. Anthropology in action is suspended between these two poles and swings between them.”

Scope of Action Anthropology

Action anthropology is a branch of anthropology that extends its hand to help a group of people to solve a problem and learns something in the process. An action anthropologist is and must be a theoretical anthropologist not only in background but also in practice. In their professional role they can point out the factual consequences of alternative modes of action, or recommended the best technical means for bringing about an end previously value determined. Professor Nadel thinks that “value judgments are inseparable from an investigation”, and he claims that “valuing is a part of the ethnologist’s work,” The personal value-laden reactions are absolutely necessary for an ethnographer to bring out the cultural reality of



the group under observation. In other words value judgments may indeed contribute to the understanding of cultural reality, anthropology should have practiced utility only when its problems are set in terms of values. This ‘value-infused observation’ bears practical utility. However, the so-called ‘value-involvement’ of the applied or action anthropologist in his scientific researches may prove to be disadvantageous to the persons dealing with “pure science” as the applied anthropologist presumes to urge one course of action as against another, he has moved outside the realm of science. Thus, the action anthropologist disclaims pure science because of his method called clinical perhaps experimental, in the sense that a physician continually improves his diagnosis with tentative remedies.

When an applied anthropologist feels the urge for a course of prolonged action to solve a problem, action anthropology is initiated. The action anthropology recognizes its own responsibility in solving human problems. Therefore, it sticks on the problems until they are solved. After solving problems, action anthropologists may generate new theories and findings, acceptable to the general anthropology.

In modern anthropology, the 'action anthropology' and 'applied anthropology' are the parallel developments. It is impossible for an anthropologist to know every minute things of a society, other than his own, no matter how closely he is associated with it. So his recommendations are liable to a certain degrees of errors- complete and accurate prediction of human behavior is not always possible. In this respect, action anthropologists can show the ideal performance. Their duty does not end with formulation of concrete recommendations. They remain constantly associated with a project until and unless the goal is achieved. As a programme of action proceeds, the anthropologists have to revise their judgments and recommend for further action according to the reactions of the recipient groups.

The scope of action anthropology also covers dealing of the circumstances of global warfare. For instance, during the crucial pre-war years of the 1930's, the axis powers were quite alive to the potentialities of using anthropological techniques in the colonial situation and were prepared to employ them among native people who might come under their rule. They established anthropological training centres for further colonial rulers "in which ethnology and comparative linguistics had a prominent place." The physical anthropologists were also brought into the arena of public debate as in Germany, especially during "the racist dogma of the Nazi political creed".

Limitation of Action Anthropology

The misuse of anthropological findings by those who controlled power at that time was a matter of deep concern of action anthropologists. Similarly, the research findings of physical scientists were utilized for destructive rather than constructive purposes which posed serious problems before human society. This threat continues even now. Active participation of the anthropologist was sought specially on the onset of war when "conquest brought the need to govern peoples with differing cultures, whose conventions could not be flouted". Occupational officers were given specialized training in respect of the customs of the people of varied cultures. Anthropological linguists were called on to develop interpreters to handle a foreign idiom, and the problems of enculturation.



As for the basic contribution of anthropology to our knowledge of man and his works, there is little argument except on questions of method and theory. All who

accept the fundamental postulates of science and admit the need for scientific analysis of all aspects of the natural world and human experience in it take this for granted. That anthropologists have not studied more people or have not encompassed in their research a greater range of cultures and problems inherent in their study is a matter of lack of available personnel problems. That the efforts of anthropologists have been effective is apparent in the steady development of the resources of the discipline.

Conclusion:

Action anthropology can function only in an independent manner and in institutions where an action anthropologist can combine both action and research. An action anthropologist as a social doctor combines in himself the responsibility for diagnosing the disease, prescribing the medicines, following up treatment, changing the prescription if need arises and finally bringing about health and happiness about in society. Obviously in such type of research, monitoring, evaluation and the consequent shift in the strategy goes on simultaneously. An action anthropologist cannot separate anthropological theory from his problems and programmes, so action anthropology is all of these together.
